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ABSTRACT

For the 1982-83 school year, the Austin (Texas) Public Schools adopted a high school attendance policy allowing a maximum of 10 absences per semester for course credit to be earned. Under this policy, Austin's high school attendance rose to an all-time high of 93.5 percent in 1983-84. In 1984-85, education reform mandated by the Texas Legislature set a state standard. A student could now miss no more than five classes per semester and receive course credit, but principals could "excuse" absences at their discretion. During the first year of the "five-absence" policy, Austin's high school attendance nearly matched the previous year's record high. Then began a remarkable decline, as excessive absences over five were excused in record numbers. District rumors held that students, parents, and school administrators had figured out the game and knew how to play it. In 1989, the Texas Legislature abandoned the five-absence rule in favor of an 80-day per semester attendance requirement, with days lost to be made up before course credit may be received. This report describes how the five-absence rule failed, so that institutional wisdom may help ensure the new policy's success. The study concluded that since the beginning of the five-absence rule, Austin high school attendance rates had deteriorated, the number of excused absences had increased, absences were not inflated by dropout counts, and the rule did not cause more students to drop out. The number of excused absences circumvented the rule and made it ineffective. (MLH)

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A Failed Attendance Policy - *2,713,598 Excuses*

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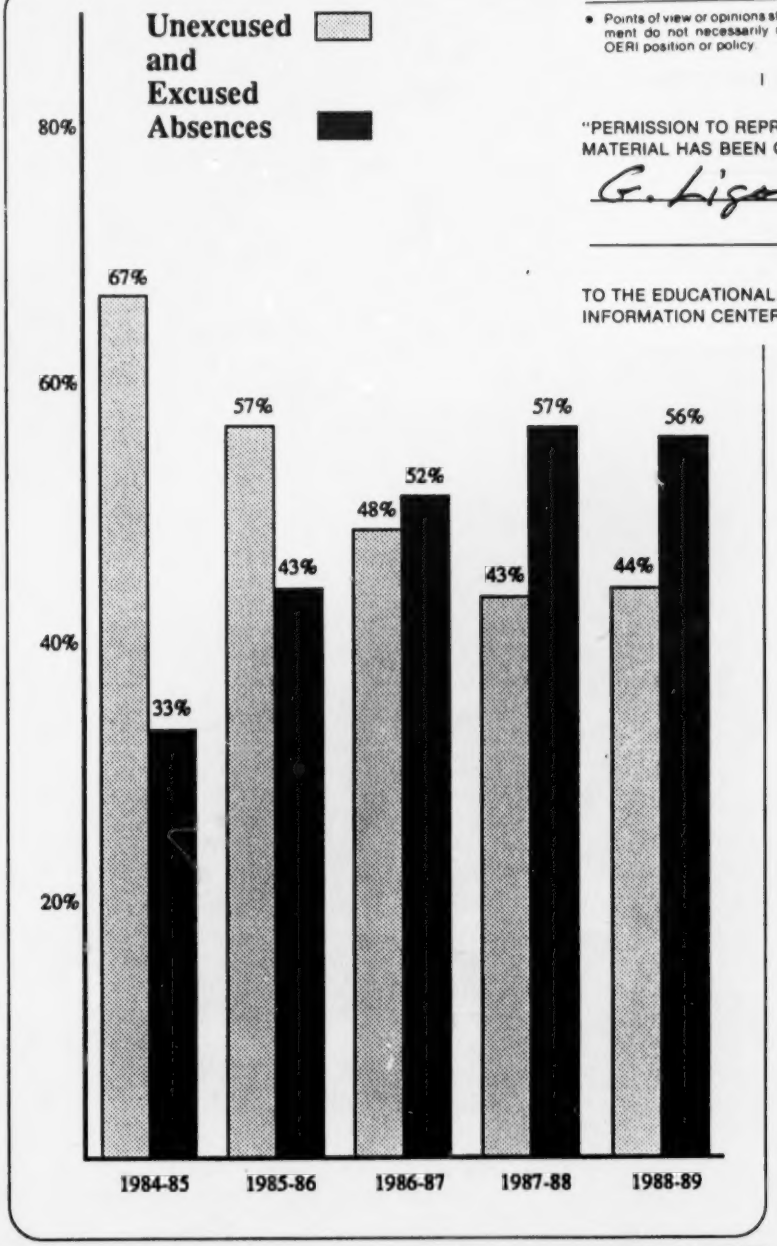

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, Mass., April, 1990.

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Executive Summary

A Failed Attendance Policy - 2,713,598 Excuses

A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, 1990

AUTHORS: Glynn Ligon, Elaine Jackson

Austin, Texas, Public Schools

Program Description

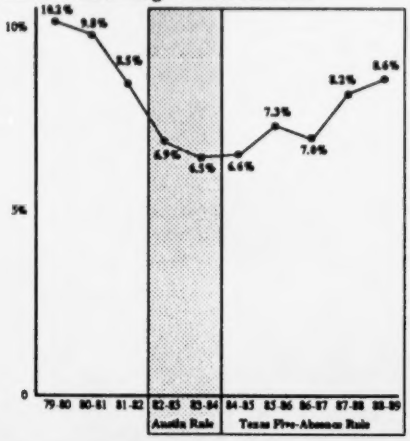
For the 1982-83 school year, the Board adopted an attendance policy for high school students that allowed a maximum of 10 absences in a semester for credit to be earned for a course. An appeal process at the end of the semester was complicated, and disliked by students and staff.

In 1984-85 the State "five-absence rule" began. Since that time a student with more than five unexcused absences in a semester course fails to earn credit for the course.

However, an absence may be excused by the principal, and in fact, absences are routinely excused if a note from a parent is received by the attendance clerk.

The Texas Legislature in 1989 abandoned the five-absence rule in favor of an 80-day per semester attendance requirement, with days lost to be made up before credit for the course can be received.

Austin District High School Absences



Major Findings

1. **Since the beginning of the five-absence rule, have Austin Public Schools high school attendance rates improved?**

   NO. In year 1, 1984-85, overall attendance rates remained within one-tenth of a percentage point of AISD's all-time high set in 1983-84. However, the number of individual students who accumulated more than five absences dropped by 30% in the fall and by 14% in the spring of year 1. Since that time, the number of students accumulating more than five absences in the fall semester has increased 94% and 52% in the spring. Overall absence rates are now well above the rates prior to the five-absence rule.

2. **Has the number of excused absences increased?**

   YES. Many more absences are being excused now than when the rule was new. In semester 1, 17% of all absences were excused. In semester 10, 57% were excused. The percentage of students who accumulate more than five unexcused absences has risen modestly from 13.12% in the fall of year one to 15.52%. This is an 18% increase in the number of students being denied credit based upon exceeding five unexcused absences. Clearly, the five-absence rule is denying credit to a modestly higher number of students while the overall absence rate has risen sharply.

3. **Are absences inflated by schools that keep students on their active rolls longer to avoid increasing their dropout counts?**

   NO. A few more students are now held longer on the rolls before being dropped, but they account for only a fraction of a percentage point in the absence rates.

4. **Did the State five-absence rule cause more students to drop out?**

   Probably Not. Dropouts were more successful in getting their absences excused than were other students.

Conclusion

The five-absence rule initially worked to maintain high attendance in District high schools; however, in the past few years, the number of absences that are being excused has risen — circumventing the five-absence rule and making it ineffective.

A FAILED ATTENDANCE POLICY
2,713,598 Excuses

AUTHORS: Glynn Ligon, Elaine Jackson

For the 1982-83 school year, the Austin (TX) Public Schools adopted an attendance policy that was generally regarded as tough and effective. High school students were required to miss no more than 10 class periods per semester — for whatever reason — in order to receive credit for a course. Absences in excess of 10 could only be "excused" if the student maintained a passing average in the course, then requested an appeal hearing at the end of the semester and presented convincing reasons for the excessive absences. Under this policy, Austin's high school attendance rate rose to an all-time high of 93.5% in 1983-84. This policy is discussed in Office of Research and Evaluation publication 82.55, Volume IV, Appendix Y.

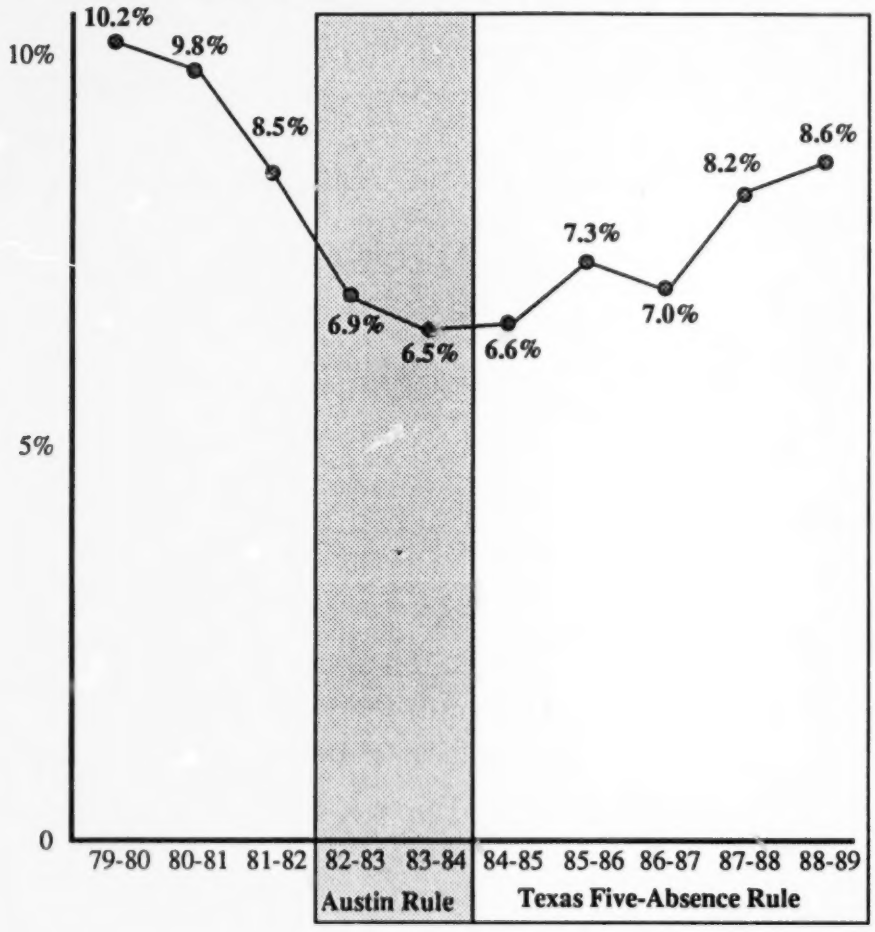
In 1984-85, education reform mandated by Texas House Bill 72 set a standard for the entire State. A student could miss no more than five classes per semester and receive credit for a course. However, principals could "excuse" absences at their discretion. Even in Austin, this reform, labeled the five-absence rule, was predicted to be a tougher standard than the previous local absence policy.

What ensued was fascinating. In the first year of the five-absence rule, high school attendance remained within one-tenth percentage point (93.4%) of the previous year's record high. Then a remarkable decline began as excessive absences over five were excused in large numbers. The talk around the District was that the students, parents, and school administrators had figured out the game and knew how to play it. Figure 1 shows the trend in absences across the last decade.

Now, the Legislature has changed the game again. Beginning in 1989-90, a student must attend at least 80 days in a semester. (Semesters in AISD typically have 87 or 88 days to total the 175-day minimum Texas school year.) Class periods missed must be made up to recover the 80 required in order for the student to receive credit for a course.

One of the purposes for this report is to describe how the five-absence rule failed, so that institutional wisdom can be applied to the new 80-day rule to ensure its success.

Figure 1: Austin District High School Absences



THE ANALYSES

Four evaluation questions were posed and explored.

1. Since the beginning of the five-absence rule, have District high school attendance rates improved?

2. Has the number of excused absences increased?

3. Are absences inflated by schools that keep students on their active rolls longer to avoid increasing their dropout counts?

4. Did the five-absence rule cause more students to drop out?

Question 1

Since the beginning of the five-absence rule, have Austin high school attendance rates improved?

NO.

Figure 2 shows that the annual percent attendance (aggregate days in attendance divided by aggregate days of membership) set a District record high of 93.5% in 1983-84, the year prior to the start of the five-absence rule. In 1984-85, year 1 of the five-absence rule, the attendance rates remained high at 93.4%. In year 5 of the rule, AISD high school students attended at their lowest rate since 1980-81, 90.4%.

The local attendance policy that was in effect in 1982-83 and 1983-84 appeared to be effective, as shown in Figure 2. Clearly, high school attendance declined during the five years of the five-absence rule.

Figure 2: High School Attendance

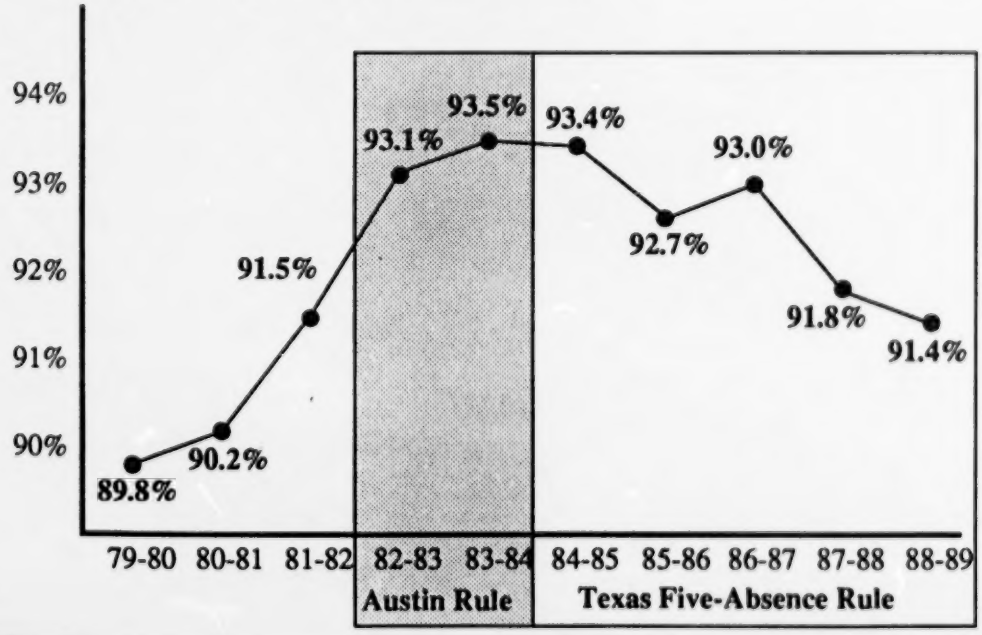


Figure 3 shows that the number of students acquiring over five absences fell initially when the rule was implemented. Students with five or more absences (either excused or unexcused) dropped 30% in the fall and 14% in the spring of year 1 of the rule. However, from that time, the number of students climbed 94% and 52% to the levels in fall and spring respectively in 1988-89.

The key statistics related to the five-absence rule are the number of students who exceed five absences; of those excess absences, the number/percentage that are unexcused; and the number/percentage of students who eventually lose credit because of excessive, unexcused absences above five. Figure 3 summarizes these key statistics.

The data base for years prior to 1984-85 does not differentiate excused from unexcused absences, because this distinction was unimportant at the time. Therefore comparisons to that year are made between the percentage of students with more than five total absences at second period, the official reporting time for state purposes, across semesters.

Figure 3: High School Students with More than Five Absences

School Year	Semester	Total Absences		Unexcused Absences
		Second Period	All Courses	All Courses
83-84	Fall	23.95%	NA	NA
	Spring	30.25%	NA	NA
84-85	Fall	16.84%	18.97%	13.12%
	Spring	25.92%	31.87%	12.16%
85-86	Fall	23.68%	24.66%	12.39%
	Spring	29.30%	36.00%	12.77%
86-87	Fall	24.48%	28.88%	10.19%
	Spring	30.00%	36.83%	11.17%
87-88	Fall	27.38%	32.89%	11.41%
	Spring	36.12%	44.82%	12.59%
88-89	Fall	32.71%	38.83%	13.52%
	Spring	39.44%	49.07%	15.52%

Question 2

Has the number of excused absences increased?

YES.

Figure 4 shows the number and percentage of absences that have been excused beginning in 1984-85. In the first semester of the five-absence rule, 17% of all absences were excused — a total of 65,873 excused absences. In the final semester of the rule, spring, 1989, 57% of all absences were excused. This is an increase of 148% in the number of absences excused (from 304,228 in year 1 to 754,479 in year 5).

As an indication of how matter-of-factly absences were being excused, some Austin high schools entered all absences into their attendance records as excused and corrected them to unexcused only if proper documentation was not provided by the student/parent.

Figure 4 shows that the percentage of students accumulating more than five unexcused absences has risen much more slowly than the absence rate itself. In the fall of year 1, 13.12% of all students accumulated more than five unexcused absences — and thus lost credit or were ineligible to earn credit in a course. In the final year, 15.52% of all students accumulated more than five unexcused absences. This is an 18% increase in the

Figure 4: High School Absences Excused

School Year	Semester	Total Absences		Unexcused Absences		Excused Absences		Total Class Enrollments	Courses in Which Students Accumulated More than Five... Total Absences		Unexcused Absences	
		#	%	#	%	#	%		#	%	#	%
84-85	Fall	388,243	100%	322,370	83%	65,873	17%	96,734	18,359	19%	12,698	13%
	Spring	535,404	100%	297,049	55%	238,355	45%	92,083	29,348	32%	11,199	12%
85-86	Fall	453,594	100%	290,353	64%	163,241	36%	99,782	24,612	25%	12,363	12%
	Spring	578,833	100%	301,822	52%	277,011	48%	94,415	33,993	36%	12,064	13%
86-87	Fall	480,407	100%	236,197	49%	244,210	51%	97,026	28,028	29%	9,895	10%
	Spring	578,715	100%	271,774	47%	306,941	53%	93,035	34,265	37%	10,397	11%
87-88	Fall	507,913	100%	234,503	46%	273,410	54%	92,165	30,322	33%	10,517	11%
	Spring	660,181	100%	270,103	41%	390,078	59%	90,064	40,373	45%	11,346	13%
88-89	Fall	602,167	100%	271,915	45%	330,252	55%	92,867	36,069	39%	12,557	14%
	Spring	739,197	100%	314,970	43%	424,227	57%	89,005	43,677	49%	13,819	16%

number of students losing credit as a result of unexcused absences — during a period when excused absences increased 148%. Clearly the five-absence rule was denying credit to a moderately higher number of students while overall absence rates rose sharply.

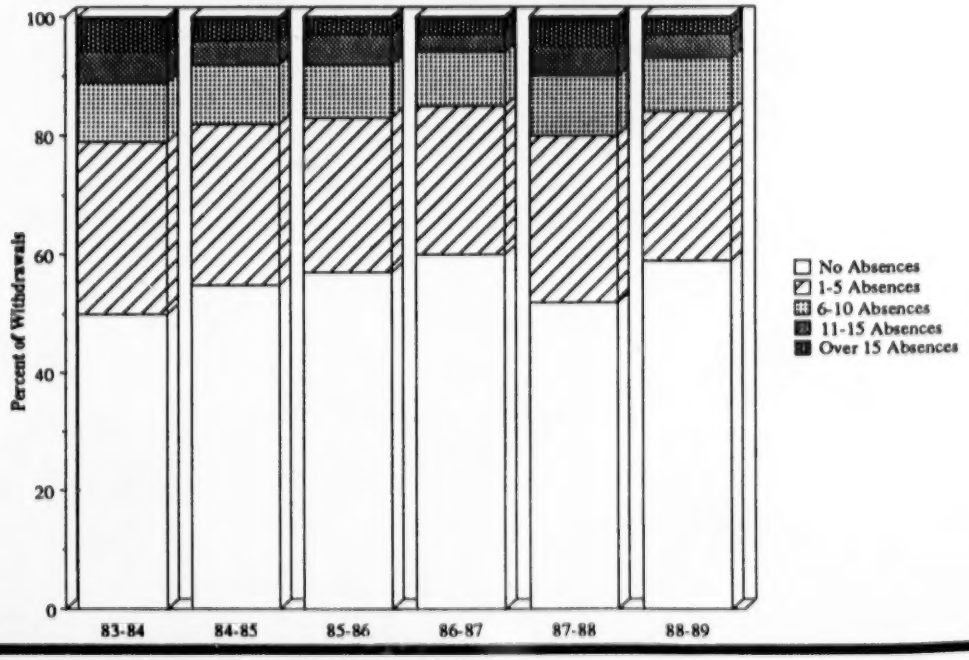
Question 3

Are absences inflated by schools that keep students on their active rolls longer to avoid increasing their dropout counts?

NO.

A legitimate concern is whether the coincidental emphasis on reduction of the high school dropout rate caused schools to retain students on their rolls longer before withdrawing them for excessive absences. The impact of this tactic would be to add absences to a student's record and to lower overall attendance rates. However, inspection of Figure 5 reveals that there has been no consistent increase in the number of students with more than 10 consecutive absences prior to withdrawal.

Figure 5: Consecutive Absences Before Withdrawal



Question 4

Did the five-absence rule cause more students to drop out?

Probably Not.

Many citizens and educators expressed concern that more students would drop out of school when they accumulated their fifth unexcused absence and "lost all hope of earning credit" for the semester. If the attendance rule change had an impact on dropouts, then that impact should have been evidenced by any or all of the following statistics.

1. A change in the overall dropout rate

Over these years, the dropout rate for high school students remained relatively stable. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 6, there was a rise of 1.6 percentage points the first year of the rule, 1984-85; however, the plethora of other educational reforms that accompanied the five-absence rule make attributing any impact directly to the rule very speculative. The bottom line is that the dropout rate did rise in coincidence with the institution of the five-absence rule but did decline again in the last year of the rule.

Figure 6: Austin Annual Dropout Rate

83-84	84-85	85-86	86-87	87-88	88-89
11.3%	12.9%	12.9%	11.7%	12.7%	11.2%

2. ***A change in the percentage of dropouts who had more than five absences upon dropping out***

As shown in Figure 7, the pattern of change was the same for the dropouts as for the nondropouts. Upon inspection of these trends, it is possible to detect that the ratio of the percentage of dropouts with more than five absences to that percentage for all students did decline. This would support either the hypothesis that the rule reduced the number of students who had excessive absences among the dropouts more than among the non-dropouts, or that the dropouts left school earlier rather than remaining enrolled longer and accumulating more absences.

Figure 7: Dropouts With Greater Than Five Absences

Year	Number of Dropouts	% of Dropouts With >5 Absences	% of All Students With >5 Absences	Ratio of Dropouts' Percent to Nondropouts' Percent
83-84	1390	65.7	27.1	2.42
84-85	2085	43.5	21.4	2.03
85-86	2032	49.7	26.5	1.88
86-87	1957	53.0	27.2	1.95
87-88	2058	58.6	31.8	1.84
88-89	1995	64.7	36.1	1.79

3. ***A change in the percentage of dropouts who had more than five unexcused absences upon dropping out***

As shown in Figure 8, the percentage of dropouts who had more than five unexcused absences prior to dropping out actually declined more than did that percentage for all students. A defensible interpretation is that the students who eventually dropped out were as good or better than the other students in getting their absences excused. This would argue that the five-absence rule did not

push students out of school, because those students who dropped out under the rule were successfully avoiding accumulating excessive unexcused absences.

Figure 8: Dropouts With Greater Than Five Unexcused Absences

	Dropouts		All Students	
Year	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
85-86	12.2	11.9	12.4	12.8
86-87	9.6	7.3	10.2	11.2
87-88	9.7	6.7	11.4	12.6
88-89	10.4	2.8	13.5	15.5

This does not provide evidence that the five-absence rule caused more students to drop out upon accumulating an excessive number of absences. In fact, the rule probably had a neutral impact, because the students were so adept at getting absences excused that the threat of losing credit was minor. However, one could argue that despite the numbers showing that dropouts were getting their absences excused, the threat of losing credit influenced more to drop out.

Now, how can we explain the fact that the statewide ground swell of demands for changing the rule was based mostly on the impression that students were being forced out? One plausible interpretation is that indeed some students did leave upon accumulating excessive absences and these students could not be kept in or brought back because credit could not be regained. However, these students may have dropped out for other reasons also. Because this in-depth analysis was conducted within a single school system rather than statewide, there is also the possibility that other school systems were much less generous in excusing absences than the Austin principals were.

What are the characteristics of an effective attendance rule?

Based on the three attendance rules tracked since 1979, the following characteristics appear to be required for an attendance rule to be effective.

- Denial of credit must be a reality, rather than a threat.
- Absences must not be excused as they occur because this allows limitless absences. When the absence limit is exceeded, a formal appeals process to review reasons and to determine how work/time must be made up is necessary.
- Students must be allowed to make up missed class periods to avoid losing credit mid-semester and having no reason to attend class for the rest of the semester.
- Parents must be informed of absences before the limit is reached and be a part of the appeals process after the limit is exceeded.
- The administrative burden must not be so great as to foster subversion of the intent of the rule to avoid work.

Technical Note:
Complete statistical tables with the details of the figures in this paper are available in publication number 88.45 from the Office of Research and Evaluation, Austin Public Schools, 6100 Guadalupe, Austin, Texas 78752

CONCLUSIONS

Austin high school attendance was poor a decade ago — below 90%. With the implementation of a local policy, high school attendance improved to an all-time high of 93.5% in 1983-84. However, the administrative work required to enforce the policy was unpopular. When the statewide five-absence rule began in 1984-85, the initial reaction in Austin was positive — possibly cautiously compliant with the new, unknown rule. However, as obtaining an excused absence became routine, the number of absences rose quickly. The five-absence rule then became less effective than its predecessor — Austin's local ten-absence policy.

Now, Austin has been presented with a new challenge — a new attendance rule beginning in 1989-90. Apparently, the integrity of the enforcement, in other words the difficulty encountered by a student in obtaining an excuse or earning credit by making up missed class periods, is a key to an attendance policy's effectiveness. Our experience says that the administrative burden associated with enforcing the attendance policy is a key to the faithful implementation by school staff.

In conclusion, the five-absence rule failed because obtaining an excuse for an absence was so easy that being absent more frequently did not substantially increase a student's risk of losing course credit. For the new 80-day attendance rule to be effective, students and parents must be convinced by school staff that students really will be required to make up missed class periods.

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